

THE GIRL AT GLASER'S

BY EVELYN MOSSE LUDLUM

CHATA GLASER, stirring up baking-powder biscuit for supper, had brought her pan of flour and moulding-board into the front room of the parental adobe, so that she might establish easy communication with her brother Cad, aged fourteen, whom she had bribed to sit in the doorway and tell her what was happening outside.

"That *was* Domingo who crossed the flat a bit ago," drawled Cad, without looking round. "He's a-comin' back."

Chata watched from where she stood in the shadow, and was presently rewarded by seeing a horseman flash across a rectangle of the out-door sunlight. Domingo. She knew the tilt of his silver-trimmed sombrero and the carry of his fine shoulders.

Chata thumped the dough she was rolling with loud thumps before inquiring, indifferently,

"He ain't a-hitching up?"

"He's waitin' round, sure," said Cad.

Chata fell silent, but it was only to give her entire attention to business. When once her cookery was in the oven, she would have a few moments to herself.

Meanwhile other people were arriving, and Cad announced them all by name, Indians as well as Mexicans. Soon, whipping out of sight, Chata made herself heard in lively clankings of stove iron, and in an instant was beside her brother where he lounged on the door-sill.

The view thence of a huge inland cattle-ranch, dry with the long California summer and sternly shut in by desert mountains; of little-travelled roads leading by endless windings to regions rather than places—such loneliness and nakedness must have been appalling to some natures. But Chata, though seventeen years old, had never seen a town, and there were no sharp contrasts in her mind. She did not ask a livelier scene than that presented by her father's store on mail-days, twice a week. The store was of adobe like the house, and stood

opposite it across the road, dwelling and store together being all there was of Glaser's.

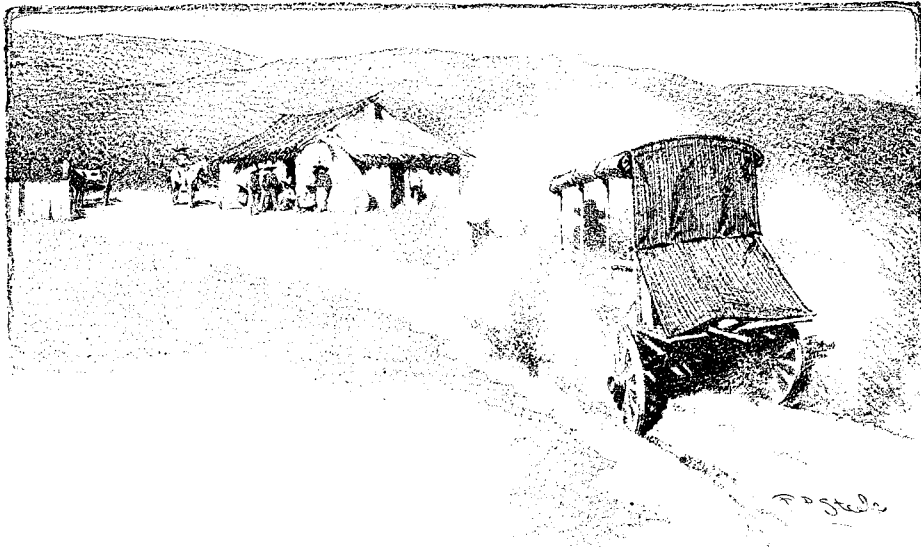
"Wonder if Domingo's looking for a letter?" she hazarded.

Cad was just starting off for the store, but he did turn and give her the knowing grin of a boy who finds he is beginning to see through a girl's tricks. So she wanted to make talk about the handsome half-breed, did she?

"Aw, you know!" he scoffed, with an accent of conveying the superfluous. "He's on'y just waitin' round to see folks."

The crowd at Glaser's may now have numbered a full dozen, Glaser himself being the only white man—a distinction, however, that was all but obliterated by his mode of life and long-continued association with the frontier. Some men lounged on boxes; one or two were still in their wagons. Domingo Brown alone—he was of Indian blood on his mother's side, but of a white father—showed himself on horseback, and therefore at his best. Under his careless pose what need to say there lurked a thrilling consciousness of the dwelling-house opposite? For like reason, and not really to relieve the tedium of waiting for the stage, he was even then daring Pepe, an Indian boy, to a trial of speed between their respective ponies. That bit of road between house and store had seen much horse-play time and again, but this race was not to be. A blur of dust lifted itself leisurely into view at a distance, beyond a tongue of rolling land; a great cloud of soldier-blackbirds rose on a thousand wings, swerved aside; and the stage was in sight.

There was nothing of gallant California tradition in this stage; no thundering in-speed with crack of whip and jovial voice of bandit-defying Jehu. An ancient surrey, beetle-slow in progress, sufficed for the mail, a small trade in parcels, and a large trade in gossip. Travel by that route there was practically none, and yet to-day there was actually a strange



THE ARRIVAL OF THE MAIL AT GLASER'S.

face beside the well-known countenance of Celso, the driver.

The dusty trap drives up and stops in a dead silence. In a dead silence the flat-bowelled mail-pouch is thrown out. Glaser lets it lie unnoticed. He is watching the new arrival, who is vigorously mopping his face and whipping his garments with a large white handkerchief—sure indication of the city man: what few handkerchiefs Glaser carries in stock are brilliant orange and yellow. The stranger emerges from the thickest of the dust to show a keen bright face, pink and blond and sunny, and all the brighter in contrast with the stolid dark faces around him.

Celso the stage-driver, silently appealed to, makes a gesture toward Glaser, a stiff-whiskered small man with a repellent eye.

Glaser yields his hand to be shaken, but with a grunt. What he more than suspects is that Celso has got him in on the business of entertaining this chap, of putting him up, at least for the night: where else is there to go?

The stranger remains beautifully unimpressed by saturnine speculations.

"Now what I am looking for," he hastens to say, with great openness of heart and an equal trust in the tempting nature of his business, "is mines—to list 'em. Everything goes down in my good books,

from a hundred-stamp mill to a white rag on an outcropping, only providing the 'color' is in sight, and enough of it." His eyes shoot sparkles of worldly wisdom into the somewhat bovine eyes of his auditors. "For I'll tell you what it is," and he doubles his chin upon the edge of his very high linen collar with an air of dignity, "I represent money."

"Dere ain't no mines here," says Glaser, his tones fairly crackling with dryness.

"Oh, come, you know!" scoffs Stannard, good-humoredly—he has given his name as Stannard; "you fellows in this country all have an interest in some 'find' or other"—and gathering a handful of cigars from various pockets of his attire, he offers them to Glaser for first pick, with the remark, "You put me up to-night, and to-morrow I'll begin looking round."

But Glaser pushes the cigars away with the back of his red-hairy hand. "I ain't putting nobody up," he declares, crossly. "I don't keep open house here. Dere is only my daughter to cook."

Unabashed by which rebuff, only amused by the unconscious cannibalism of the last sentence, Stannard winks—at Domingo, as it happens. But Domingo remains darkly impervious to any merely verbal jest, and Stannard addresses himself once more to Glaser:

"I know, you know, that you do put

up the stage-driver. Whatever is good enough for him is good enough for me; crackers and cheese from the store and an arm-load of hay will do me the nicest kind."

Even Glaser thaws under the good-comradeship expressed in the speaker's manner as well as in his words.

"Vell," he grunts, ignoring the hay and crackers, "you go talk to Chata;" and dragging the mail-pouch after him, he disappears in the store.

The traveller lifts a mystified eyebrow on his audience. "And who, pray, is Chata?" Whereupon divers heads, wreathed in smoke of his providing, are ready to wag him solemnly toward the house opposite.

Stannard glances that way, and acknowledges his susceptibility to an eter-

ging gate under the darkly meditative gaze of Domingo, who, forgetting to smoke, only guards the glowing point of his cigar in the brown hollow of his hand.

But all that Stannard sees is Chata sitting alone on her door-stone under a magnificent grape-vine, whose lusty growth has everywhere burst through the sort of wooden awning, its support. He approaches her, hat in hand, with the suavity of a man on delightfully sure ground. Her father has consented that he should stay there all night if she—Miss Glaser—be willing.

What is his expectation—shyness; an effusion of welcome?

But Chata only sits throned, with a fine pervasive consciousness of being made the cynosure of many admiring glances, and lets Mr. Stannard wait a good minute, all pink and blond and smiling as he is.

"There ain't nothin' to hender you stayin'," she vouchsafes at last, "if you can put up with things;" and then, interrupting his hearty assurances on that point with a dryness hardly inferior to her father's, "Well, come in."

It did not seem to be in Chata any resentment at a stranger's intrusion. Her manner was sublimely neutral, indifferent.

Yet she might, indeed, have been reluctant to permit such a glance as Stannard's to take in the meagreness of her life in the old adobe—the wooden floor sagging and splintery; the comfortless hearth with its warped bricks; the careless frontier extravagance in sheath-knives and pistols displayed on the mantel; the scant, hide-seated chairs; the doors on every side standing wide, that outer one, which Chata had just vacated, to the inroads of dust and ruffraff and predatory chickens and barefooted boys. The decorations on the dingy walls were perhaps worst of all—lurid calendars advertising a horse-liniment, tobacco, and axle-grease. Stannard even fancies that Chata presents the same high decorative note in her yellow dress, with a string of wax beads around her neck and a rattle-snake skin belt around her waist.

The girl, with her red hair and clear dark skin, had beauty enough, though of an odd emotionless sort, to catch a masculine eye. Her figure, however, was not so



"CHATA ONLY SITS THRONED."

nal influence by slight yet eloquent perkings-up of his being. Chata is still in the doorway.

He crosses the road and opens a sag-

fine as her face. It was only amateur dress-making, perhaps, but it looked very much as if that long back and proportionately hollow chest had been formed by too much dawdling on the doorstep, with nobody to see.

"It must be mighty hard on a young girl like you," Stannard ventured, "to live away out here, without any society."

"If you're mean-in' folks," replied Chata, not resistently, but merely as stating a fact, "I see a heap. There are always the mail-days, and once in two or three months there is a ball up to the school-house."

Stannard promptly dropped his half - patronizing tone for one of conventional compliment:

"I hope there'll be a ball while I am in this part of the country. I would like a dance with you."

"'Twouldn't do you no good if there was a ball," she answered, with her air of imparting bottom facts. "I'm all took for the next--was before the last was over. Me and the school-teacher are the only ladies, and she is forty years old."

After a supper of beans and bacon, biscuit and coffee, Chata drew her guest aside to have a practical word with him.

"The boys has been sleepin' in the bed where you've got to sleep," she said. "Perhaps you'll mind?"

Stannard's air of always having had the best the world afforded was slightly clouded over. He looked at Chata inquiringly.

"I mean," she said, returning prompt-



"I'LL TELL YOU WHAT IT IS—I REPRESENT MONEY."

ly to her native preference for calling a spade a spade, "there's no clean things for it."

And that was when Stannard thought ruefully of an arm-load of sweet-smelling hay.

Afterwards, however, he joined the stage-driver and Glaser in the store, and all discomforts seemed worth while. For Glaser, enjoying a fine cigar, mellowed under that influence, and gave the visitor all the information in his power, howbeit tinged with a dry pessimism that was characteristic.

"The mount'ins is vool of prospect-holes clear from here to Banner," he said, "and back again, and everybody's dying to sell till you come to naming a finger, and den—" he broke off with a contemptuous puff.

"Bonanza prices, eh?" Stannard surmised.

Glaser nodded.

"And every tomfool of 'em so poor as he runs in debt for his beans and bacon! Dere's my brother-in-law--why," with a cynical twist of his features, "Rack Gliddings, he has a mine, too, the bigges' mine in the country"—a wry, interior smile here. "Gliddings, he has found the famous Pegleg—you're hearing of the Pegleg?—and much good it does him!"

"The Pegleg!" echoed Stannard, with a light laugh, mistaking the source of Glaser's cynical mirth. "Oh, a good many old prospectors have found the Pegleg, off and on!"

"Rack's got it fast enough," said Glaser, correcting him. "It ain't that. I've see the nuggets and coarse gold myself, and plenty of dem. He used to go down once in a while on the sly and dig, and come back and live like a lord, but the fellows got to folleyin' him, campin' on his trail, and he got scared, and he didn't go no more. But do you t'ink as he'll describe his location, or form a company to vork the mine, or even sell? No"—answering his last query with an air of hard disgust—"he won't even sell, or equivylent to it: he asks a cold half-million, cash, and his family livin' this two year off barley ground between stones, like so many Indians. Viskey is all he buyin' nowadays—on tick, over to Mexican Bob's."

A half-million, cash! But, then, if it were really the Pegleg! Golden shuttles began to weave to and fro in Stannard's head. The Midas touch could hardly be a myth, after all. But now to come face to face with this poor devil of a Gliddings—to tempt him—to triumph over him at very much less cost than half a million!

Glaser, keenly watching, must have seen the greed in Stannard's eyes. He put in a word of advice:

"But don't you go huntin' Gliddings up. Let him make the first move. You look round here for a few days, and he'll be hearin' of you."

And he ended by inviting Stannard to make Glaser's his headquarters indefinitely.

So it was settled, and the very next day queer old mountaineers began to find Stannard out, and to fill him full of

marvellous stories—stories that they corroborated by exhibits of rock, and dingy papers that purported to be reports of assays. Sometimes, to while away the time of waiting for Gliddings, Stannard would go off on an all-day jaunt to look into some shaft or tunnel, and he always came back with a fresh sense of the humors of the country, the only drawback to his enjoyment being that he had no one with whom to share his good stories. Certainly not Glaser, nor the stage-driver, nor even Chata—Chata least of all. That young person took her life and surroundings, Stannard included, too soberly for any mirth about them. Under the sunshine of Stannard's evident approval, the old adobe soon assumed an air of unwonted thrift and cleanliness.

Her father and the boys, she told him with her usual candor, never had "minded things." Stannard was gratified. And, besides, Chata diverted him in a way she was quite unconscious of. Coming upon her suddenly one afternoon, he found her thrumming an old battered guitar, its strings pieced out by twine.

"You sing!" he cried.

Chata nodded assent across her instrument without ceasing her deep-toned humming.

"Alto?"

Chata shook her head in decided negative.

"Oh, soprano!"

But, to his surprise, Chata continued to shake her head.

"I on'y sing love-songs."

Stannard's eyes leaped with something more mischievous than satisfaction.

"I just been learned a new one before you came, by Mr. Rodriguez"—the stage-driver, though Stannard did not know his surname—"he hearing it over to the other end of the road."

"You'll sing it—for me?"

Now Chata meant to do just that, so his soft, pleading tone was quite unnecessary. She was already twanging some introductory arpeggios, and she began at once, with a serene air of conferring superlative delight. Her loud, drawling voice was of considerable range and of nerve-thrilling quality.

"Love not, love not, ye hapless sons of clay," sang Chata—"Love not, love not, for love will pass away." The moss of half a century had grown gray upon her

new song. But Stannard must listen to more than that—her whole repertory, it seemed. For, without urging, she launched forth upon the ever-tender "Juanita"; and from that to "Maggie May" was but a change of key. She wound up with a Spanish song, whose primitive expression of passion she afterwards translated for her listener's behoof:

"Perdi la dicha
Y la esperanza
Cuando gozaba
De un amor incom-
prensible."

But after Chata had finished, it was Stannard's turn to display what he knew of new songs, and a barytone voice—rapture of its owner. Now began an altogether strange experience for Chata. Romance of a sort beyond her wildest dreams seeped through and through her as she heard herself wooed in the audacious verse and lilt-ing measures of "Paradise Alley," "Lou'siana Lou," "Rosy O'Grady," and Heaven knows what besides. She listened until the frowning bowlder heaps that ringed Glaser's round seemed to melt together and waver mistily away. Soon she was going about her work singing a snatch here and a snatch there out of a whole headful of haunting melodies.

Very soon, too, there came a mail-day on which the customary gathering of men at the store was made aware of some change in Chata. She withheld her inspiring presence from the accustomed door-stone, while her voice could be heard ringing out from the house in the strenuous lyrical assertion that "Baby" was the name she loved—

"Sweeter than perfume of roses,
Softer than coo of a dove."

Domingo had dismounted from his horse, and was hanging around in hopes of catching a glimpse, at least, of Chata; but that song, with its tantalizing sugges-tions of a new influence at work in her life, was about to drive him to horse and

away, when at last—at last!—a brilliant print dress freshly "done up" dazzled upon his vision.

Yet Chata was not settling herself in the door-way; she was walking toward the fence. A glance invited him to come over. He went at once, awkward with haste, yet his heart so shone through him that not his fine eyes only, but even his dark skin seemed radiant.

"I heard you singing," he began, eager to plunge into conversation, and speaking in Spanish, as always to Chata, for it was her tongue on her mother's side.

But Chata answered in English.

Yes, that was one of her new songs. "I've been learned so many."

Domingo understood, and the light went out of him. The pupils of his eyes grew fixed and sombre.

Chata laughed. "Me an' Mr. Stannard sing together 'most every day."

Domingo's gaze went off from her face; he could no longer meet her eyes, the wrath in him was so fierce. His nostrils flared as if he had been running.

Chata's nature expanded under these evidences of deep emotion.

"Mr. Stannard is so awful smart," she drawled, with gay insolence. "He is educated so fine."

"He is a fool," said Domingo, moving his red lips with great precision to form the unwonted English words.



"HE IS A FOOL," SAID DOMINGO.

Chata was in no wise daunted. "You ought to come in some time and hear his beau-ti-ful voice!"

To such an invitation at such a moment Domingo had no reply but in action. He turned on his heel, crossed the road, flung leg over horse, and went galloping madly off across the plain, without a backward glance.

Chata looked after him as far as she could see his flapping neckerchief, her young head cocked, her lips curled up deliciously at the corners.

Miles away from Glaser's at that very moment, perhaps, Stannard was thinking of Chata—and of divers other matters—with a self-complacency not to be outdone by hers.

He had left Glaser's on the morning before for a seventeen-mile drive by the nearest "cut-off" to Rack Gliddings's usual rendezvous. By certain information he knew that the owner of the Pegleg would be there, and in an expectant frame of mind, seeing that rumor had pictured Stannard everywhere as "a little tow-head feller with millions back of him."

The place of meeting was the nearest store from Glaser's. Stannard discovered it first from the top of a great billow of land, one of many billows rising eastward to a rugged "divide." Seen from that distance the squat adobe looked no bigger than a dog-house, perched as it was on the edge of an appalling wilderness of brush and rock. Approaching nearer, Stannard could see much the same sort of crowd, dark and listless, with which he had become familiar on mail-days at Glaser's, awaiting his arrival. Gliddings must be among them, and Gliddings, he knew, was a white man, but in those uniformly swarthy faces it was difficult—impossible—at a glance to detect the merely sun-browned from those who were browned by nature's deeper chemistries. To mistake an Indian for a Mexican, a Mexican for a white man, would not work harm, but there was danger in the reverse order. Stannard resolved not to commit himself. His blue, clear eyes, that had missed no point, good or bad, of Chata's make-up, and that could hide laughing criticism under bold admiration, now swept all observers with a genial openness.

"I am looking for a Mr. Rack Gliddings," he said.

His glance may have rested for a frac-

tion of a second upon a man who was supporting his frame in an upright position by fitting shoulder and thigh to the wall.

"T'other's him," said this personage, turning a thumb in the proper direction. Whereat a tall figure in a faded canvas coat, his black hair hanging in tangled locks over his shoulders, rose from a box, solemnly shook hands with Stannard, and solemnly sat down again. Not a word about the great object of their meeting.

"I will pique the old party," thought Stannard, and he turned to the general company and got off much the same announcement with which he had edified Glaser's on the evening of his arrival there:

"What I'm after, boys, is mines. Everything goes down in my good books, only providing the color is in sight," and so on.

Here the word was magical. Grimy hands went down deep into pockets and brought up many and divers bits of rock, which, in turn, were eagerly spat on and polished with coat sleeves, in order that glittering particles might disclose themselves to Stannard's view.

Mexican Bob, who kept the store, would alone have engaged "the little tow-head feller with millions behind him" for a week's excursions to various mining properties. But, standing in the midst of the crowd, Stannard felt himself firmly pulled aside, and there was Rack Gliddings face to face with him, solemnly warning him.

"You fight shy of Bob," he whispered, lying confidentially, and driving his fictions home with a hand that patted Stannard's breast. "Greasers won't never sell for no figger. Soon 's you'd bite, he'd be up two naughts. You see how it is: these sort o' fellers round here lives in hopes so long their idee gets magnificent-er every day. The most Bob would do would be to bondage—"

"Eh?" interrupted Stannard; and then, enlightened, "Oh, you mean he would bond."

"Jest what I said, *hombre*," returned Gliddings, a sombre dislike of word-stickers glassing his deep-sunken eyes. "You might git Bob to bondage, but he'll never sell. Now I've got a mine out there on the desert"—and he launched into a history of his wonderful find:

"I'd always heard talk of how people were looking for something up near the

Riverside county-line, so I wasn't thinkin' of the Pegleg at all one day, tramping it across the desert by the old trail through the San Felipe. Besides, I was on the homestretch, and sick o' prospecting for one while; still, habit had strong a-holt of me, and I caught myself picking up stuff as I went along; and that is how, just a-top of a mound, I found myself examining something queer and black I'd got off the surface of the ground. It had a heft to it like gold, and that set me to scratching the earth; and six inches down, sir, I came upon the real article in coarse grains and shining nuggets. I filled my pockets, an' then I stood up and took a good look around me, and all at once it came over me what I'd found. Everything tallied to a hair with that old story of Pegleg Smith in '37. There was the San Felipe Pass, and here was I a-top of the middle one of the three little hills I'd heard tell about for years and years."

Stannard slept that night rolled in a blanket on Mexican Bob's counter, and in the morning, before any one else was stirring, he and Gliddings slipped away.

"The boys has follered me time and again," Gliddings said, as they rode off in Stannard's two-wheeled trap. "They set a Indian on me once: he never come back."

The owner of the Pegleg looked grim enough in the gray early light with a pistol on his thigh and a sentinel gleam in his eyes.

They struck off through the brush and rocks by a mere wood road, twined in and out of grisly foot-hills, and stopped at a prospector's cabin, the very soul and centre of a tremendous loneliness, got some breakfast, transferred their food and tools from the cart to the back of a small ragged burro, and set off in true miner's style.

As they trudged along, Gliddings broke the vast silence with a story of how he had once been done out of a fine quartz location by a swindling partner. The mine had since enriched its owners. As Gliddings declared, the old rascal who had swindled him "could sign his check for ten figgers any day."

The foot-hills grew into mountains. The mountains grew savage, mere bastions of rock. The weird drouth of the desert soughed through every wind-gap. Gliddings looked morose, brooding. Sometimes he wheeled about suddenly in his

tracks and stared back of him; then to the tramp again.

"I've took 'hornings' from hundreds o' stringers and ledges all over this bedeviled country," he said. "I've tramped and parched for months on a stretch, reduced down to sidewinder rattlers for meat and juice o' the bitter cactus for drink; I've fought sand and heat and Indians and the desert-craze, and at last I've got hold o' something which I don't mean to let nobody skin the first cream of but me. If I'd try to work the claim myself, I'd be murdered inside o' a month; if I took in a pardner, he'd rob me; and as for selling—well, I say better never sell; better die a millionaire o' hope than to die a cheated dog. Say now," and he turned his swarthy, suspicious face upon Stannard, "what's your proposition? What option do you want? Who're you going to send out to expert the thing? How soon am I going to see the color of actual coin?"

Stannard could not answer all these questions in a breath; he really did not know how to answer them; but he was sure of one thing: Gliddings must somehow be gotten into a more amiable frame of mind.

It was first in order, he said, for him to see the mine, and then what was to hinder Mr. Gliddings and himself from talking the whole thing over sociably and coming to some agreement? The mine was his; everything was in his hands.

Gliddings shook his long, unkempt locks. "No knowing," was all he allowed to escape him of inward and gloomy suggestions.

Stannard bethought him of whiling away the time and enlivening his companion by singing, but in the act of craning his throat for the "Always be a Miss, always be a Miss," of *Princess Bonnie*, another idea struck him—a topic of conversation that, beautifully aloof from questions of mines and options, could not fail to be entertaining to any masculine mind. It was Chata whom he thought of—Chata, the only young girl with white blood in her veins for thirty miles around; Chata, who he had understood for the first time at Bob's last night was the day-star of every male firmament from Banner to Temecula; Chata, whom he had won with a song, a glance, a twirl of his mustache. He would not

actually boast of her, but he felt impelled to speak of her.

"She is a peach," he now owned to Gliddings, with a self-gratulatory accent.

"There 'ain't been much else talked about over to Bob's," Gliddings affirmed, accepting Stannard's proffer of a fresh theme, "but how you are setting up to her. Some of the boys feels pretty sore about it."

"She's a queen," said Stannard, giving that peculiar turn to the word which indicates a slang term.

But Gliddings solemnly translated, finding deep satisfaction in a frontier equivalent: "She's a nugget as big as your fist."

"And such an ingenuous creature!" broke out Stannard, from an inner spring of enjoyment.

His racy sense of comprehending all men and things, which had carried him along thus far through life, must have been blinded to a surprised pricking up of Gliddings's head. For he chuckled fatuously. On the instant Gliddings was standing stock-still, glaring at him, a hand on his pistol.

"What the eternal do you mean," cried Gliddings, "by calling that young lady a name?"

"A name?" stammered the other.

"Ingenuous creature was what you said."

"Oh!"—relieved. "I said *ingenious*, Mr. Gliddings."

"And what I saying you said!" exclaimed Gliddings, with an oath. "I 'ain't liked your tone, anyhow, a good piece back. Now see here, you low-down coyote, you, do you think I'm going to have my niece by marriage called a name right in front of my face?"

His niece—Chata! Good Heavens! Glaser had said something about brother-in-law, but it had quite slipped Stannard's mind. The two men were so unlike—

Gliddings a Missourian, Glaser a German. It was Mexican wives that played the mischief! For mischief there was. Stannard saw a sight fit to curdle the fresh color of his cheeks. Gliddings had pulled his pistol on him.



"YOU'LL EAT THEM WORDS OR YOU'LL EAT LEAD PUDDING."

"What I saying you said!" reiterated the infuriated old prospector. "You'll eat them words or you'll eat lead pudding."

A picked quarrel, by heaven! to keep him from ever seeing the Pegleg! Was that glittering dream really vanished into thin air?

There was the pistol, and there was Gliddings behind it.

"If I have said anything to offend you," he began, meeting the danger with some show of firmness, "why—of course, Mr. Gliddings, I—"

"And you'll do a heap sight more!"

snarled Gliddings. "You'll repent you ever tried it on. I'm a-going to clip an ear off of you. I'm a-going to mark you for life." He meant it. "One—two—" he counted, his eyes glittering with excitement.

Stannard's brain worked automatically, but it was hard to command the rusty hinges of his voice.

"Oh, I say, Gliddings!"—he tried to laugh, but croaked instead.

Gliddings counted on.

"You don't understand. A man can't really mean to make fun of the girl he wants to marry."

Gliddings's count stopped. His pistol went mechanically out of sight, and he thrust forward a none-too-cleanly hand. Stannard grasped it firmly, and stood a long minute doing his full part in a slow, fraternal pump-handle movement.

The mere bliss of retaining all his members flowed from everywhere into Stannard's spirit; but then he recollected the mine.

"Shall we go on, Mr. Gliddings?"

Gliddings seemed to be ruminating.

"I was reckonin' on your marrying into the family, like, when I agreed to let you in on this big proposition."

"That's square enough," said Stannard, fast recovering his belief in himself. "Though of course Miss Glaser.... might or might not—"

"Oh, she might not, eh?" echoed Gliddings. "Well, we'll see about that. I'm not going to have any slip-up on this deal."

Stannard's heart went down into his boots—an awful premonition of what was coming.

"Afore we go any further, we'll just turn tail and acrost country to Glaser's and find out. You might put off proposing, you know," with a cackling laugh, "after you buy the Pegleg."

It was meant for a joke, but to Stannard the saying looked like a gleam of malevolent insight. He dared not risk exciting Gliddings's suspicion by any excuse or plea for delay.

Within an hour they had reversed the order of their going, had restored the burro to its owner's cabin and its pack to the cart, and were jogging, all too swiftly, by "cut-offs" known to Gliddings, straight across the plain.

Gliddings had the reins and did all the talking. Stannard was silent, gloomy,

chewing the cud of bitterness. A hundred times he had pranked it gayly with the maiden heart in town, but in the back country, it seemed, he was to meet his Waterloo. Of course Chata Glaser would jump at him, and he a man to whom bachelorhood was the most delightful estate in the world.

So he was brought, more dead than alive, to Glaser's, some two hours after Domingo had ridden away with his air of going forever.

Some accident must have delayed the stage. The front of the store was still fringed by the usual waiting crowd. A hope that Glaser might be at supper and the dreaded interview with Chata delayed died in Stannard's breast.

Gliddings hitched at the fence, not at the store. Chata was singing loud, within the house, a lay of Stannard's teaching:

"She was the daughter
Of officer Porter,
My charming Kit-ty."

In one listener's ears the foolish strain sounded tragical.

"I'll tell you right here," Gliddings approached Stannard closely to say, with confidential touch of palm, patting Stannard's vest, "I never have bankered to see my niece throw herself on no Mexican or Indian. Domingo Brown!" He spat out the name in huge disgust before preceding his companion in-doors.

Chata was sitting all alone, her torso curled around the guitar on which she was improvising an accompaniment to her song. Their entrance happened in the very middle of a note long-drawn through several purely tentative chords.

Gliddings spoke up at once and right to the point, with all his personal weight and dignity.

"Chata, here's a young man as has something very particular to say to you."

Chata did stop singing, but though her head went up alertly, she kept on mechanically picking at the strings. Stannard was waiting his inevitable turn to speak, his chin solemnly doubled, his erstwhile candid eyes filmed with a sombre gloom.

"Miss Glaser," he began, as soon as Chata looked at him, "I—I happened to mention to—" He cleared his husky throat, and rushed to the point with a cool desperation. "All I need to ask, Chata, is whether you care enough for me to—to—well, to marry me?"

Chata had laid her guitar across her lap, leaning her elbows upon it, her chin being supported in both palms. She remained wholly lost an instant in mastering the situation.

"Of course," she presently let fall, "I knowed you was a-courting me, Mr. Stannard." Stannard gulped with a dry throat. "And I reckoned you'd propose soon 's you got ready. But"—swiftly turning her glance on Gliddings, and speaking with the high scorn of a free feminine spirit—"whoever's gone and made it any of your say so, Uncle Rack?"

She rose then, her guitar swinging in one hand, and stood up tall in her pink gown and pride of many lovers.

"And I'll let you know, Uncle Rack," she continued, "just here, that this is one of them times you're hearing of, when three is a terrible crowd."

Then Stannard tasted the satisfaction of seeing the man with the gun, his late formidable master, wilt down under a shaft of dry youthful sarcasm and go slinking off.

For an instant the young man's whole nature moved toward the girl there in genuine admiration.

"You're great, Chata!"

But Chata waved off his impulsive approach, and uttered herself in a strange mixture of womanly insight and childish ignorance:

"Something's gone and took the feel-

in's out of you. Yet you was dead in earnest singing to me. What did Uncle Rack do? You ain't a bit the same. A girl knows the difference."

Stannard opened his lips to protest, but she would not listen. She seemed all at once to understand the vital discrepancy between the town that says so much more than it means and the country that means so much more than it ever can say.

"I've just got to be liked clear down to the ground," insisted Chata, gravely. "And," with an inflection which particularized as eloquently as names, "there's aplenty does."

Her meaning was clear, if her grammar was not, and Stannard accepted it as final. If he did not want her, still less did she want him—a fact which secretly astounded him.

And the Pegleg? He went out to look for Gliddings, and found that the old prospector had borrowed a horse and had ridden away, leaving no message. He carried the news to Chata in real consternation. But that clear-eyed young woman gave him her opinion on the whole matter without fear or rhetoric:

"If Uncle Rack hadn't quarrelled with you about me, he would of about something, sure. Or say he actually showing you his big mine, he'd of repented, and shot you out there on the desert to keep you quiet."

And Stannard believed her.